Teaching evaluation practices

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Teaching evaluation practices:

an early career practitioner's reflections

Abstract

Evaluation is an integral part of good professional practice and the systematic development of teaching expertise. In this paper I look into some of the sources of evaluation in the Hospitality, Events and Tourism subject area and note that evaluation practice in the subject area varies according to its purpose and the actors undertaking it. I contend that if evaluation is to feed our practice, we must triangulate evaluation data received from various sources. Such an integrated approach to evaluation would be helpful as it can capture a comprehensive picture of various teaching and learning practices.

Teaching evaluation practices: an early career practitioner's reflections

Introduction

Evaluation 'is a way of understanding the effects of our teaching on students' learning' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 209) and involves various activities undertaken to monitor teaching performance. It helps one to 'pinpoint achievements, build on strengths, and identify areas where there is scope for improvements' (Hounsell, 2009, p. 198). Evaluation is an integral part of good professional practice and the systematic development of teaching expertise. Though the main aim of evaluation is improving one's practice, the motive and context of evaluation can vary. In this paper, I will look into some of the sources of evaluation in my subject area, Hospitality, Events and Tourism at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and discuss action plans that could help enhance learning and teaching in this field. My self-reflection of current evaluation practice suggests that adopting an integrated approach to evaluation would be helpful as it can capture a full and rounded picture of various teaching and learning practices.

There are various sources of data for teaching evaluation; one of the most common is feedback from students (Hoyt & Perera, 2000). While some scholars have appreciated the use of student feedback on teaching as a helpful tool for improving teaching effectiveness (Scott, 2007), such measures have received mixed responses (Stergiou & Airey, 2012). A review by Wachtel (1998) has indicated that continual improvement in teaching can be supported by regular student evaluation; however, according to D'Andrea and Gosling (2005), this must be aided by self-reflection. Amongst other sources of data for teaching evaluation, the role of self-reflection is key for early career staff because, in the opinion of Biggs and Tang (2007), the promotion of a deeper level of learning among students is a function of early career staff by continually monitoring, evaluating and reflecting upon their own practice. This is even more important if the early career lecturer comes from a different socio-cultural context, because one's educational philosophy is often grounded in cultural background.

Scholarship in the evaluation of teaching in Hospitality, Events and Tourism has largely looked into student feedback on individual teachers and course quality and has focussed more on the experience of students over a whole programme of study. However, evaluation at a modular level is largely under-represented (Stergiou & Airey, 2012) and scholars have failed to appreciate the role of self-reflection in interpreting student feedback (Wakefield & Adie, 2012). Additionally, the perspective of a non-Western scholar is strongly lacking because the subject area is still very much dominated by Western scholars (Salazar, 2015). This paper intends to shed light on the above research gap and applies self-reflection to look into the use of various sources that inform teaching evaluation practices in higher education in Scotland. It examines student feedback on teaching evaluation through an early career lecturer's perspective; it contends that evaluation of teaching can be comprehended more by analysing all formal and informal feedback sources at one's disposal.

Evaluation theories and the strategies applied in the Events, Hospitality and Tourism subject area

There are various standpoints on the theories of evaluation (see Saunders, Trowler and Bamber, 2011 for detailed discussions). For the purpose of this paper I would like to discuss two major strands here. The first concerns the nature of inquiry embedded in evaluation which advances the positivist approach, where evaluation is developed for summative purposes such as promotions (Coe & Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). In contrast to the above, there is the opposite viewpoint that treats evaluation as a process, a part of good professional practice and the systemic development of teaching expertise (Scriven, 1991). The premise is that excellence in teaching is the result of regular monitoring of teaching performance, building on strength and identifying areas for improvement: as such it should be taken as a goal-free approach. Both of the above perspectives greatly influence the purpose and nature of evaluation in higher education institutions in the UK.

The practice of evaluation in the UK shows that it is undertaken by people within structures of power and resource allocation (Saunders, Trowler & Bamber, 2011) and is guided by both internal and external drivers. There are four domains or levels of evaluative practice in the UK: national, programmatic, institutional and self. At the national level, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in the UK are the two prominent external drivers directing evaluative practices within universities in the UK. The evaluations by these agencies '…serve as a short health check, for the institution and for QAA, on the institution's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision…' (QAA, 2009, p. 1).

In the Scottish context, the Scottish Funding Council's Quality Enhancement Framework for Scottish Higher Education is a sector-wide policy adopted by all higher education institutions. It focusses on the enhancement of learning experiences through five elements: these include subject reviews by the institutions themselves, a greater voice for students in institutional review procedures, and improved public information, amongst others. This framework provides Scottish higher education institutions with more autonomy in defining and measuring 'quality' through a review method called the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). The ELIR is a way for Scottish institutions to examine and monitor their own quality processes and provides an opportunity for critical self-reflection (Bamber, 2011). At the institutional level, the University's Assessment Policy and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) are the key drivers of evaluation.

In practice, the evaluation tool and methods vary according to the purpose of evaluation and the actors involved. For instance, new lecturers may want to find out whether they are doing 'okay'; module coordinators may be seeking how smoothly their course units are running; programme leaders may want to know whether there are sufficient opportunities for choice and progression (Hounsell, 2009). For the university, evaluation is a means to compare their standing at the national level. To achieve these purposes, there are evaluation methods at different levels, for instance, at a national level there is the National Student Survey which is a mandatory student satisfaction survey that gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses. At the programme level, the Programme Annual Report evaluates the different aspects of a programme to provide assurance of standards and to address programme level enhancement. At the modular level, Module Review Forms are used to ensure that a qualitative evaluation has taken place. At the individual level, lecturers use different tools to self-evaluate their teaching practices. Most of the above evaluation instruments are operated by student feedback and responses.

Reflective practice and the location of researcher

In this paper, I take a reflective approach because this approach explores and appreciates the researcher's experience in leading to new understandings. My approach corresponds strongly with Schön (1983) who takes the view that the practitioner defines their own identity, situating themselves in context. Such an approach to learning is very much influenced by the practitioner's personal values, affecting the way the professional sets problems and defines their interpersonal theories of action. However, such an approach is fraught with the debate on researcher's background and the location of researcher in the process.

In social science research the debate on the location of author has remained unabated since the publication of the Barthes' 'Death of the Author', in 1968 in which he challenged the traditional, humanist concept of a single source of all meaning (Bhandari, 2014). Defying the concept of intentionality, i.e. a text meant literally what its author intended it to mean, Barthes (1977) advanced the notion of human agency by highlighting the socially determined structure rather than the intentional acts of individuals. This argument was subsequently contested by Foucault in 1969 who believed that the author cannot disappear that simply because the author, or what Foucault terms 'author-function', is historically-determined and culturally-specific and whose effects persist (Foucault, 1980).

In the contemporary context, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) consider that the personal biography of the researcher is important. They suggest that every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that is configured in its special way, though such centrality of researcher in research has been challenged by positivists for whom such an approach lacks reliability and validity. Tribe (2006) argues that research cannot be understood as separate from the researcher. He identifies five factors at work in the knowledge force-field which are rules, ends, ideology, person and position. According to Tribe, the location of researcher in terms of intellectual and geographical situatedness, location within an academic community and a wider language and cultural community is important factors in research. Thus, it is imperative that I explain my background and education philosophy that has shaped my learning and teaching approaches.

I am an early career lecturer in Events, Hospitality and Tourism Management at the University of the West of Scotland and have been in academia for 3 years. My understanding of learning and teaching is greatly influenced by both Western and Eastern philosophical leanings as I am originally from Nepal and moved to Scotland eight years ago, initially for my PhD studies and later for my professional career. As such my educational philosophy is deeply rooted in my cultural and academic background. I am a tourism scholar and come from the high mountains in Nepal. Mountains represent various different standpoints: they are icons of romanticism and a tourist attraction; they characterise physical hardship and a development challenge; they are also a deep source of philosophical inspiration. For me, the quest for knowledge is comparable to the passion of a mountaineer and learning is analogous to mountaineering. Knowledge is like mountains – layered, enticing and intimidating – requiring a huge amount of hard work and perseverance to scale it successfully. For me, learning is like a long and winding trek to the mountain-peak: you explore as you go up and having successfully reached the peak you have a great sense of achievement, an inordinate feeling of freedom up-close and, most importantly, a perfect vantage point to see the world around you.

I believe that, like a mountain tour-guide who learns from each journey, as a teacher, I should learn from my teaching and learning journey reflectively. My approach would be like a mountain tour-guide, who, after getting to the top of a steep hill, shelters under a tree and takes a deep breath to look back at the distance covered on that day. I would look back at my own journey after reaching each of my landmarks. My reflection would not be limited to introspection but would be like the one proposed by Sheward and Renshaw (2011), in other words, it would be aiming to address wider issues and encouraging forward thinking. To ensure this is happening, I consider self-evaluation of teaching as an integral part of my own development since I am a non-native English speaker and students' feedback assumes a greater importance for me.

Student feedback and self-reflection sits at the core of my education philosophy. Like tourists who knowingly decide to take strenuous journey for self-fulfilment, students are clear why they are doing the programme and it is important to heed their learning experience and feedback on teaching. As their journey guide, I encourage them to search for meaning and make sense of the subject matter through relating and applying ideas – fostering 'active student-centred learning' (Kember & Gow, 1990). This makes them take control of their learning and enables them to evaluate their learning experiences rather than be passive recipients of knowledge (Maher, 2004). This approach stimulates student reflection on their learning process, and informs my teaching strategies. Both of them are helpful in my teaching practice because, firstly, it is a means to encourage students to develop their intellectual skills, and secondly, to transform my own practice whether it is the practice of learning or the practice of the discipline or the profession (Ryan, 2011).

Evaluation practices at the UWS

In my subject area, evaluation is guided by both external and internal drivers as discussed earlier. The most important document used to record student feedback at UWS is the 'Module Experience Questionnaire' which plays a key role in informing other evaluative exercises in the university such as Subject Health Reviews, annual monitoring events and the erstwhile Subject Development Groups. The MEQ survey collects information on development and delivery of the module. The questionnaire seeks close-ended feedback on teaching: assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; and finally, personal development. It also gives an opportunity for students to provide qualitative comments on positive and negative aspects of the module.

Staff Student Liaison Meetings are another way to obtain student feedback formally. The SSLG provides a forum for students and staff to discuss student-led agendas on learning and teaching issues and to consult with students on future plans for curriculum development. In most cases SSLG provides good feedback; however, sometimes it acts like a 'complaint shop' and there is less discussion on improving learning and teaching practice. Personal tutorship meetings are another way to get student feedback in a friendly and 'less formal' environment, though it is not the main purpose of these meetings. My experience has shown that students bring a wide range of issues on learning and teaching to these meetings. The in-house survey is another useful tool for learning and teaching evaluation practised in my subject area. We conducted a pre-National Student Survey survey in October-November 2014 with the L9 students to get an early glimpse of student satisfaction, as they are the ones who will be targeted in the National Student Survey in 2015.

Similarly, the external examiner's report also provides useful feedback. It helps to evaluate the academic robustness of our modules and courses. The report also compares the teaching and learning practices vis-a-vis other institutions, as external examiners usually refer to practice in their own institutions in the report. I solicit students' feedback on my teaching informally on a Post-it pad at the end of my teaching session. Similarly, I also invite my colleagues for teaching observation as it is a very good source of peer evaluation. Though the various surveys are good they do not always provide a comprehensive picture independently and this limitation makes it essential to read the various tools applied for student feedback concurrently.

Reflection on evaluation methods and materials

My observation of the evaluation practices in my subject area suggests that while the collection of feedback from students happens quite efficiently and at various levels, the job of processing those responses usually happens in isolation and consideration of the results does not receive an equal level of importance by all staff. Another point is that there is over-emphasis on the student evaluation surveys, mostly the National Student Surveys, which is happening in all universities because of government calls for greater accountability (Prosser, 2011). For example, at the UWS two National Student Surveys conferences were held in 2014, one in January and the other in October.

Since its introduction in 2005, the NSS has raised a number of issues for UK Higher Education Institutions. These issues have related to concerns about the survey instrument and methodology (Ramsden, 2004): the way the survey is presented to students (Furedi, 2008) and how results have been interpreted as student satisfaction ratings and used to construct league tables (Prosser, 2005). Prosser (2005, p.1) argues that institutions should instead focus on 'interpreting the results as indicators of student experiences of the context in which their teaching and learning occur', and use these to illuminate areas of the student experience that may need further investigation. While the role of student surveys to uphold 'publicly credible, independent and rigorous scrutiny of institutions' is appreciated (QAA, 2006, p.1), we should also be careful about it for two reasons: i) that the practice of course evaluation by students tends to hinder academic freedom (Wallace, 1999); and ii) that the National Student Survey could lead to staff anxieties about the possible use of it as a disciplinary tool, which could lead to defensive staff attitudes. The post-National Student Survey Conference report prepared by the UWS has acknowledged this point and said that the use of the National Student Survey to identify causes for concern and areas of poor performance can lead to it being seen as demotivating for staff (Hulme, Bennett & Buckley, 2014).

I would argue that instead of relying excessively on one evaluation method as a mark of good or bad practice it would be helpful if different feedback and evaluation tools were applied and compositely read and interpreted. I will use two examples from my area of practice to illustrate this: the first example shows the inadequacy of the formal tool in 'proper' evaluation and the second exemplifies how non-formal self-evaluative feedback forms are also short of providing the complete answer. In my L7 Introduction to Events module, students were asked to carry out environmental auditing of the University's different departments as part of their group work. Some students could not understand the relevance of environmental sustainability in the events industry and questioned the contribution of the environmental aspects in the MEQ. A student wrote, ‘the aspect of green impact was not fully explained, why it was necessary?. However, this project was highly appraised both within and outwith the university and was awarded a ‘Green Futures Innovation for Engagement Award’ by the National Union of Students. This example cautions us that student opinions in the survey must be read carefully. Another issue with the MEQ is that it is an intrinsic or formal driver of evaluation and as such teaching staff become complacent if everything is positive in the MEQ surveys.

My second example shows that there is inadequacy in the informal method of evaluation as well. I have been using Post-it pads for receiving student feedback informally on my teaching. This feedback gives a good indication of where I am in terms of teaching. However, sometimes this feedback is conflicting in nature and interpretation needs to be done carefully in such cases. For instance, a student had the following opinion of my L9 Responsible Tourism Management teaching, ‘Good examples, although it would be good to look more at the UK, perhaps more relatable to us and we’d be able to contribute more’. Another student said,

> ‘I enjoyed your lectures & tutorial as I found it interesting and useful for… And another important thing – you reflect your teaching on situations in Scotland … and Nepal as you are originally from there and familiar with inside information. All this information widens horizons of people.’

Such contrasting feedback creates a dilemma. On the one hand we are driven by the University’s Corporate Strategy that outlines developing an ‘internationalised curriculum’ to expand its global reach, and on the other hand we are guided to tailor our teaching to meet the students’ learning expectations. In the above case, the external examiner’s report provided an answer. The external examiner report had the following comment on the above module, ‘(R)esponsible Tourism presents the depth of knowledge and academic expertise and should be commended; the challenging issues, debate and opportunity for student differential is applauded’. This example stresses a need for combining both formal and non-formal evaluation tools for interpreting student feedback, which is also mentioned in the UWS Learning and Teaching Strategy that underlines the need for ‘variety in assessment practice’ in its strategy (LTAS 2011-

15). However, it is important that different evaluation tools are read in conjunction with each other and evaluation must be taken as an integrated approach. The inadequacy of a single method for evaluation also advances the point that evaluation should be carried out more like a process.

Discussion and action plan

I would stress the need to apply various methods in my evaluation practice. Evaluation of my module will be informed by at least three formal methods that include mid-term evaluation, the MEQ surveys at the end of the module and the external examiner's report. The mid-term evaluation needs to be focussed on the direction and progress of the module so far, while the MEQ will give information on overall delivery of the module. The external examiner's report will indicate academic standing and good practice of the module. This approach integrates the various components of the evaluation system.

I believe that enhancing one's teaching practices can be best achieved with informal feedback from students. In addition to Post-it pads, there can be various ways to receive feedback from my students to assess my teaching. For example: i) asking students to write letters to successors. This is an interesting way to discover what students feel are the most crucial elements of your teaching, by asking them to identify the essential things future students would need to know to survive your module; ii) asking students to keep a student learning journal where students compile summaries of student experiences of learning, written in their own terms and using this as a tool of student assessment; and iii) asking students to fill in a critical incident questionnaire. A single page form is handed out to students requiring them to detail events that happened within the class. It is not about what students liked or did not like, it is about specific and concrete significant events.

Conclusions

In this paper, I discussed the evaluation of learning and teaching methods and the tools used to carry this out and that evaluation varies according to its purpose and actors undertaking it.

While different tools can have their own advantages and disadvantages, it is important to properly process information received from different sources. I also argued that the quality of evaluation can feed our practice if data received from different sources are analysed in triangulation. For an early career lecturer, evaluative feedback from both peers and students is important. In order to achieve peer support, the practice of applying a collaborative delivery of modules would be helpful. For assessing one's own teaching practice I have outlined that a plan to receive feedback from students through various methods would be a useful approach.

This paper emphasises the role of self-reflection as a tool to process teaching evaluation data received through student feedback. Though reflection in the context of learning has been appreciated as a medium through which individuals engage to explore their experiences and lead to new understandings, this paper illustrated that it is an iterative process that is helpful in identifying a number of issues associated with student feedback on teaching quality. In this case, the use of self-reflection was helpful not only in identifying the issues but was also valuable in the development and transformation of the practice. For example, self-reflection has strongly informed my action plan of employing more informal feedback from student in the form of letter to successor; keeping a student learning journal; and the use of a critical incident questionnaire. However, it must be acknowledged that the findings reported in this paper are drawn from a single practitioner in the subject area, and as such well-designed research from other early career practitioners from diverse cultural contexts would be helpful in furthering this study area. Future researchers could look into this.

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